
Don't Overlook the Minorities

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Inner Mongolia University and Inner Mongolia Teachers' University, the two major universities of the Region, though ostensibly devoted to 'developing the education of the Mongol nationality', and having foreign language departments which teach English (using the Han language as the language of instruction), require students to pass a Han-language entrance exam, regardless of nationality, before they can be admitted. Since the reopening of institutions of higher learning in China during the closing years of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), both universities' English departments have graduated no more than four or five students fluent in Mongol.

This is a classic Catch-22 situation. Students can not learn English in Mongol language middle schools because there are no teachers who can teach English in Mongol. Yet there can not be any such qualified teachers until students who graduate from Mongol language middle schools know English well enough to pass the Han-language entrance exam and score well enough on the English section to be admitted into an English department.

The Case of Qinghai

Nearly 40% of Qinghai's four million inhabitants are minority people. 700,000 Tibetans represent the largest group. To my knowledge, at this writing, there is not a single soul in this province fluent in Tibetan and English and the three institutions of higher learning that have

English departments have never, in their history, graduated students fluent in Tibetan. Major reasons for this are identical to those in Inner Mongolia.

Possible Strategies for TESL to Minorities

I will use my own experience in both Inner Mongolia and Qinghai to illustrate possible ways of helping minority people learn English. In the case of Inner Mongolia, where I lived from 1984-1987, I contacted the Inner Mongolia Television and Radio Station (which had daily Mongol language radio and television broadcasts) and explained that I was interested in teaching English in Mongol and that, as I had no fluency in this language, I had several Mongol friends and that together we could put together a radio/television program. After a number of discussions, this was agreed to and additionally, we secured a promise from the local Education Publishing House to publish an English-Mongol text that would accompany the program. This work began in 1985 and continued for one and half years. Hopefully, pending publication of the text, the program should be broadcast sometime in 1990-1991 throughout the Region.

In Qinghai, where I have lived since 1987, I suggested to Qinghai Education College (which educates primarily middle school teachers for an additional two years of study) that a special class of Tibetan-language speakers be brought in and taught English for three years after which they would teach English in the Tibetan language to middle school students. After considerable discussion, this program was agreed to and presently we are teaching just such a class of

students. Additionally we are presently working on preparing a television program teaching English in Tibetan.

Conclusions

With recent political changes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, there should be a surge of interest in English and a consequent demand for more TESL. The sizable minority populations within these areas, as well as in countries that have yet to experience such dramatic political change, should not be overlooked by those who teach English. Local minority media organizations are often eager to work with TESL teachers to make English available to their audiences. Because minority learners are no longer dependent on a poorly-understood second language to learn English, there is likely to be pronounced interest.

A number of challenges remain. For example, the Tu (Monguor) and Salar

minorities in Qinghai and the Daur, Evenk, and Oroqen minorities of Inner Mongolia have no written language used in education. Additionally, there are often considerable differences within these minority languages. Developing English-teaching programs in such languages poses a number of unique difficulties. But with interest among students and an awareness of problems on the part of TESL professionals, the possibilities for developing institutional programs are considerable.

About the Author

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Minority peoples who speak their own languages and are immersed in their respective minority culture are often excluded from learning English when it is taught in a third language. Let me illustrate this using China, where I have taught English for seven years.

The Case of Inner Mongolia

Though Inner Mongolia is officially touted as a 'minority autonomous region' only 13% of its more than 20 million inhabitants are Mongols, who are rapidly being Sinicized. After establishment of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region in 1947 (the first minority autonomous region established in China) the ever-growing number of Mongols born and educated in major metropolitan areas such as Hohhot, the capital, have little or

no fluency in Mongol. They speak only the Han language.

However, there remain, particularly in remote areas, a number of Mongol schools where students are taught primarily in Mongol. After graduation such students are well-versed in Mongol but have difficulty functioning in the Han language.

Passage of university entrance exams written in Mongol provides entree to only a handful of departments in a few colleges and universities in Inner Mongolia and several 'nationality institutes' scattered about China. Very few students educated in Mongol language middle schools annually pass nation-wide Han language university entrance exams.

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